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Introduction

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The French Romantic poet Gérard de Nerval explored the irrational with lucidity and exquisite craft, and Carl Gustav Jung regarded those explorations as a work of “extraordinary magnitude.” Like the German poet-philosophers Novalis and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Nerval rejected the rationalist universalism of the Enlightenment and privileged instead the individual subjective imagination as a way of fathoming the divine to reconnect with what the Romantics called the “life principle.” During the years of his greatest creativity, Nerval suffered from madness, for which he was institutionalized eight times, occasionally for extended periods. Eventually, at the request of his physician, Dr. Émile Blanche, he wrote his visionary memoir *Aurélia* in an ambivalent attempt to emerge from these episodes of insanity. In *Aurélia*, Nerval acknowledges the value of his medical treatment, and at the same time asserts that his doctor’s psychiatric strategies and scientific vocabulary relegate his visionary convictions to a mental illness from which he may be released only through atonement. He published the first part of *Aurélia* in *La Revue de Paris* in January 1855. The second part and then the entire book were printed posthumously in that same year.

Almost a century later, in 1942 Jung lectured on *Aurélia* for the Swiss Society for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy. Afterward, he reread and revised his interpretation with extensive handwritten notes, and in the summer of 1945, at seventy years of age and after a long illness, he presented an expanded version of his lecture to the more intimate circle of the Psychological Club in Zurich. World War II had only just ended. In his lecture, Jung introduced listeners to the importance of Nerval’s text. Contrasting an orthodox psychoanalytic interpretation with his own synthetic approach to the unconscious, Jung explained why Nerval was not able to make use of his visionary experiences in his own life. At the same time, Jung emphasized the validity of Nerval’s visions, differentiating the psychology of a work of art from the psychology of the artist. The lecture suggests how Jung’s own experiments with active imagination and the writing of *The Red Book*...
fluenced his reading of Nerval’s Aurélia as a parallel text to his own Liber Novus. Here, then, is a key to understanding Jung’s argument about the significance of symbolism in modern thought.

The editors of the Collected Works published only Jung’s one-paragraph abstract of the lecture in volume 18. The documents presented here offer a unique window into the stages of Jung’s creative process as he responds to an essential Romantic text. They are arranged backwards: from the final, extensively revised 1945 lecture, through the schematic 1942 lecture, to the initial five pages of handwritten notes and Jung’s marginalia in his copies of Aurélia—that is to say, back to Jung, with pen in hand, reading Nerval.

Gérard de Nerval

NERVAL: THE MAN

Gérard de Nerval was born Gérard Labrunie on May 22, 1808, in Paris. His father, Etienne Labrunie, had run away at the age of sixteen to serve in the revolutionary wars and in 1795 had sustained a crippling injury to his left leg. Undaunted, Etienne studied medicine and reenlisted in Napoleon’s Grande Armée in 1806. In 1807, he married Marie-Antoinette-Marguerite Laurent, the daughter of Paris linen merchants. In May 1810, two years after Gérard’s birth, Dr. and Mme Labrunie left France for Germany, where Dr. Labrunie would direct military hospitals. One day, after crossing a bridge heaped with cadavers, Mme Labrunie collapsed with a fever; she died and was buried in a local cemetery, in Silesia. Later, during Napoleon’s chaotic retreat from Russia, Dr. Labrunie lost all mementos of his wife, including her letters and jewelry.

When Gérard’s parents left for Germany, they sent their two-year-old son to live with his mother’s uncle, Antoine Boucher, at Mortefontaine, in the Valois region. Boucher was a grocer and tobacco merchant, a warm family man, a free-thinker, and reader of both classical authors and works on the occult. At Clos de Nerval, on the site of an ancient Roman camp, he often looked for coins and pottery shards to add to his antiquarian collection. Gérard was six when his father retired from the army, set up his private practice in Paris, and reclaimed his son. In 1820, when Gérard was twelve, Boucher died. Gérard remained deeply connected imaginatively to this uncle and to the Valois region of his childhood.

A strict father, Labrunie enrolled his son in the prestigious Collège Charlemagne in Paris to study humanities and languages. The boy excelled, particularly in German, which his father spoke fluently. In 1826, finishing his studies at the lycée at the age of eighteen, Gérard published a number of volumes of political verse and, a year later, his French translation of Goethe’s Faust, part 1.
Figure 1. Portrait of Gérard de Nerval. Nadar, between 1854 and 1855
Goethe praised this translation.¹ Hector Berlioz lifted passages from it for the libretto of his opera La Damnation de Faust (1846). Nerval also published translations of works by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, Novalis, and Friedrich von Schiller as well as other works by Goethe. The positive memories of his early childhood inspired several essays on the cultural and political significance of the local legends and ballads of the Valois, and led him to adopt a position much like the folk theory and subjectivism of philosopher and historian Johann Gottfried Herder. Dr. Labrunie did not approve of his son’s literary accomplishments, however, and insisted on enrolling him in the medical school at the Clinic de l’Hôtel Dieu; in 1832, Gérard assisted his father during a cholera epidemic. Despite his financial dependence on his father, he increasingly ignored his father’s ambitions and persisted with his writing. For the time being, he signed himself simply “Gérard,” a nom de plume without a surname.

Figure 2. Mortefontaine, Valois region; Louis-François Casson, 1801

¹ “He [Goethe] himself had taken up the latest French translation of his ‘Faust,’ by Gérard, which he turned over and seemed occasionally to read. ‘Some singular thoughts pass through my head;’ said he, ‘on reflecting that this book is now read in a language over which Voltaire ruled fifty years ago. You cannot understand my thoughts upon this subject, and have no idea of the influence which Voltaire and his great contemporaries had in my youth, and how they governed the whole civilized world. My biography does not clearly show what was the influence of these men in my youth, and what pains it cost me to defend myself against them, and to maintain my own ground in a true relation to nature.’ He praised Gérard’s translation as very successful, although mostly in prose. ‘I do not like,’ he said, ‘to read my “Faust” any more in German, but in this French translation all seems again fresh, new, and spirited’ (Sunday, January 3, 1830). Johann Peter Eckermann, Conversations of Goethe with Johann Peter Eckermann, ed. J. K. Moorhead, trans. John Oxenford (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 341.
In 1834, Gérard's maternal grandfather died, and Gérard inherited thirty thousand francs. This windfall enabled him to travel in southern France and Italy, and after returning to Paris, to move out of his father's house and into a flat in the Impasse du Doyenné with a group of young bohemian writer friends. Like many of his companions, he devoted himself to the Paris theater scene, hoping to make a career as a playwright. In this he failed.

Figure 3. Opéra Comique. Paris, 1850–60

Figure 4. Jenny Colon, by Noël Léon Alphonse, 1837
Gérard chose an actress, Jenny Colon, as the object of what translator Richard Sieburth (1999, xv) describes astutely as “a much-publicized infatuation.” Inspired perhaps by this unrequited love, he invested his inheritance in founding a theatrical magazine, *Le monde dramatique*, the first issue of which appeared in May 1835. Gérard also collaborated with Alexandre Dumas on an opera (*Piquillo*, 1836) in which Colon sang the lead soprano role. But by 1838, the magazine had foundered, and Gérard and his friends had to leave their lodgings when the building was condemned and requisitioned. To make things worse, Colon married her tour organizer. Having spent his inheritance, Gérard was increasingly forced to take on work as a drama critic and journalist in order to pay his debts. He joined Dumas in Frankfurt, working for him as a ghostwriter on a number of plays including *L’Alchimiste*; for only one, *Léo Burckhart*, did he receive any credit. In 1840, he began to translate the second part of Goethe’s *Faust*. In December, he traveled to Brussels, where Colon was reprising the opera role that he had come to believe he had written for her.

When Gérard returned to Paris, his emotional and financial difficulties overwhelmed him to such an extent that at the age of thirty-three, he experienced his first episode of insanity. He entered the sanatorium of Dr. Esprit
Figure 6. A fantastical genealogy, by Gérard de Nerval, 1841
Blanche in Montmartre, where he resided for nine months; the diagnosis was "manie aiguë, probablement curable." During the time in Blanche’s sanatorium, he wrote an imaginary genealogical investigation that replaces his biological father with a mythical line of forebearers, establishing Gérard as the descendant of Napoleon’s brother Joseph Bonaparte and of the German knights of Emperor Otto I, founder of the Holy Roman Empire. The diagram silences the father while lending a voice to the son, replacing the conventional paternal line with a deeper continuity. By the time he left the sanatorium, he had emerged from his descent into the underworld of madness with a new aristocratic persona: “Gérard de Nerval.” Critics have pointed to possible significances of the name, from the most obvious—an alignment with his mother’s uncle and the Clos de Nerval—to an allusion to the Roman emperor Marcus Cocceius Nerva as an imaginary ancestor, and even to an anagram of his mother’s maiden name, Laurent.

Jenny Colon died in 1842. Intending to console himself, Nerval left Paris for Alexandria and Cairo. At the time he was reading books on history and ancient religions, and these readings and this journey correlated outwardly with the archetypal universe of dreams that he had discovered during his first descent into insanity. He returned to Paris in 1844.

Over the next eleven years, Nerval alternated between periods of great literary productivity and bouts of madness. He wrote a remarkable introduction to his translations of the poems of Heinrich Heine, who had become a close friend. He coauthored an opera (Les Monténégrins, 1849), a Hindu drama (Le Chariot d’Enfant, 1850), and his own Faustian play about the invention of printing, L’Imagier de Haarlem (1851); none of these stage works met with any success. He also published a brilliantly subversive experimental serial novel (Les Faux-Saulniers, 1850/2009) and a moving account of nocturnal wanderings in some of the most squalid neighborhoods of Paris (Les Nuits d’Octobre, 1852). During this time, too, he wrote his masterpiece, a novella titled Sylvie (1853). But immediately after completing Sylvie, he was once more institutionalized, again for nine months, at the rest home of Dr. Émile Blanche, son of Dr. Esprit Blanche, in Passy; the diagnosis this time was “délire furieux.” The younger Dr. Blanche recommended that Nerval try writing his way out of his madness.

Thus began the “project” of Aurélia. Nerval rallied, and as well as working on Aurélia, he started to gather and publish a definitive edition of his works. Released in May 1854 from Blanche’s care, Nerval traveled again to Germany, but he had to be readmitted to the Passy clinic in August. In October, against Blanche’s wishes, he obtained an official discharge by appealing to friends and the Société des Gens de Lettres, who supported his suggestion that his confinement jeopardized his professional role as a writer. He continued to work on Aurélia, no longer for Blanche, but for publication in La Revue de Paris. Although Nerval was supposedly in the care of a great-aunt, he led a vagrant and solitary existence. (CONTINUED)